

Counterfactual Double Lives*

Michael Deigan

Yale University
michael.deigan@yale.edu

Abstract

Expressions typically thought to be rigid designators can refer to distinct individuals in the consequents of counterfactuals. This occurs in counteridenticals, such as “If I were you, I would arrest me”, as well as more ordinary counterfactuals with clearly possible antecedents, like “If I were a police officer, I would arrest me”. I argue that in response we should drop rigidity and deal with *de re* modal predication using something more flexible, such as counterpart theory.

We often talk about what would have happened had things been otherwise.

- (1) If I had taken I-95, I would have been caught in traffic.

Even though this describes the merely possible scenario(s) of me taking the highway, it nevertheless seems that I myself, inhabitant of the actual world, appear in it. The sentence, if I’ve uttered it, is about *me*. How best to understand this kind of *de re* modal discourse has long been a matter of controversy, particularly the question of ‘transworld identity’.¹ Should we understand the ‘I’ of the consequent as referring to a person numerically identical to the actual speaker of the utterance? Following the work of Kripke (1980) and Kaplan (1989b), this is the orthodox view. Or does it pick out possible individuals not identical to me, but ones related to me by a certain counterpart relation? This is the position taken by Lewis (1973), among others.

In this paper I raise a new problem for treating *de re* modal talk in terms of transworld identity. We lead counterfactual double lives—the same person can make multiple *distinct* appearances in the same counterfactual scenario. A transworld identity theorist cannot make sense of this, since it violates the logic of identity. If this is right, the fact that counterpart theorists don’t have the same problem with double lives is a big advantage for their theory.

I begin with a discussion of counteridenticals, a kind of counterfactual in which counterfactual doubling often plays a prominent role, and spell out the argument that making sense of this doubling requires that we drop the transworld identity view. Then I respond to two objections to the argument. In doing so I show that counterfactual doubling occurs outside counteridenticals, in more mundane counterfactuals with clearly possible antecedents.

1 Double Lives in Counteridenticals

Counteridenticals are counterfactuals whose antecedents involve apparent statements of identity between individuals who are actually distinct.

- (2) a. If I were you, I’d bring an umbrella.
b. If I were Shaq, I’d be 7 ft tall.

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¹For an overview, see Mackie and Jago (2013).

- c. If you were me, you would have done the same thing.

These are commonly used in giving advice, as in (2-a). But as we can see in (2-b) and (2-c), that's not all they can do.²

Counteridenticals have received some attention,³ but given their various interesting properties, not nearly as much as they deserve. In this paper I will be focusing on just one of these interesting properties, leaving a fuller discussion. The property that I will be focusing on is that in counteridenticals, individuals can have counterfactual double lives, seeming to make multiple distinct appearances in the same counterfactual scenario. Contrast the following.

- (3) a. If I were you, I would be pleased with myself.
- b. If I were you, I would be pleased with me.

In (3-a) the speaker is talking about how, in a certain scenario, one individual would relate to herself. In this case, she would be pleased with herself; no other individuals need be involved. But in (3-b), this is not so. The scenario being discussed is one in which one individual, referred to by the *I* of the consequent, is pleased with another, distinct individual, referred to by the *me* of the consequent. The speaker of (3-b) seems to lead a kind of counterfactual double life.

And it's not just that *I* and *me* can pick out different individuals. In counteridenticals, different occurrences of *my* can be about possessive relations to different individuals, and even different occurrences of *I* can come apart in reference.

- (4) a. If I were you, I would proofread my paper.
- b. If I were you, I would make sure that I proofread my paper.

In (4-a), the recommendation might be that the addressee proofread the addressee's paper, or it might be that she proofread the speaker's paper. In (4-b), the ambiguity of the second *I* of the consequent and the *my* give rise to at least three readings: recommendation that the addressee (i) make sure the addressee proofreads the addressee's paper, (ii) make sure the addressee proofreads the speaker's paper, and (iii) make sure the speaker proofreads the speaker's paper. So each of the two counterfactual lives of the speaker can be picked out by an *I* in the consequent of a counteridentical, sometimes even when the *I* is in the same surface position of the sentence.⁴

The double life phenomenon in non-advisory uses of counteridenticals.

- (5) a. If I were Shaq, I could look down on me.
- b. If I were Shaq, I would have dunked on me.

We also see it with other referring expressions, including other pronouns and names, which are typically thought to be rigid. Counteridenticals with the speaker as subject are the most familiar, but others are not unnatural.

²This productivity makes them unlikely candidates for being treated as idioms.

³Going back at least to Goodman's 1946 lecture on counterfactuals reprinted in Goodman (1983). See also Lewis (1973, p. 43), Lakoff (1970), Lakoff (1996), Reboul (1996), Arregui (2007), and Thomas (2008). There is also recent, more detailed work—Carina Kauf (2017) and Alex Kocurek (*forthcoming*)—of which I was unaware until after having written this paper. Kocurek independently makes an argument against the standard Kripkean view, and develops a version of the Lewisian account to which I am sympathetic.

⁴Interestingly, it's difficult to use *I* to refer to the person usually picked out by *me* if the *I* is not embedded further in some way. This can happen, though, when the thematic role of the subject is non-agentive. A prisoner might say to his captor: "If I were you, I'd have been released already".

- (6) a. I'm not sure why you're angry. If you were me, you wouldn't have waited for you either.
 b. I'm not sure why he's angry. If he were her, he would have told him the same thing.
 c. I'm not sure why John is angry. If John were Mary, John would have borrowed his car without asking, too.

So the argument below will apply not only to first-person pronouns, but also to second-person pronouns (see (6-a)),⁵ third person pronouns (see (6-b)), and names (see (6-c)).

2 The Problem for Kripke-Kaplanian Orthodoxy

The problem for transworld identity is simple: the two counterfactual ‘lives’ of the speaker are distinct, so by the transitivity and symmetry of identity, they can’t both be identical to the same thing, since that would imply they are identical with each other. But the standard Kripke-Kaplan theory of indexicals implies that what *I* designates and what *me* designates in the above examples are both identical to the speaker. Let’s see why.

Kripke (1980) argues that with respect to metaphysical modality, names in natural languages act like constants, designating the same individual in any circumstance of evaluation.⁶ This contrasts with descriptions like ‘the number of planets’ which may vary in reference across different circumstances of evaluation. To use Kripke’s terminology, names are thought to be *rigid designators*, which designate the same individuals in all possible worlds. More carefully and specifically: *weak de jure rigid designators*, as opposed to strongly or *de facto* rigid. That is, *weakly* rigid because a name is only claimed to denote the same individual in all worlds *where the relevant individual exists*, with no further claim about what it denotes in worlds where that individual doesn’t exist. And *de jure* because names are claimed to be rigid in some sense by their very semantics, or ‘by stipulation’, rather than by some reliance on descriptions which in fact hold necessarily, like “the smallest prime”.

Kaplan (1989b) showed how we can extend this kind of view to indexicals like *I* and *me* by making a “sharp distinction between contexts of use and circumstances of evaluation” (Kaplan 1989b, p. 495). Once a context of use provides some individual (in the case of *I* and *me*, the speaker in that context), that same individual will be referred to in all circumstances of evaluation.⁷ That names and indexicals are weak *de jure* rigid designators with respect to metaphysical modality is by now the orthodox view, though by no means a consensus. But even those who depart from it usually aim to maintain rigidity in less direct ways, e.g. by use of rigidifying operators.⁸

⁵We also see this in an amusing counterexample from Wodehouse (2007, p. 246):

‘Why? Be reasonable, Bertie. If you were your aunt, and you knew the sort of chap you were, would you let a fellow you knew to be your best pal tutor your son?’

This made the old head swim a bit, but I got his meaning after awhile, and I had to admit that there was much rugged good sense in what he said.

⁶With respect to epistemic modality, it is generally thought that names are *not* rigid. See Fitting and Mendelsohn (1998) and Holliday and Perry (2014).

⁷In fact, Kaplan was arguing for what he took to be the logically stronger claim that indexicals are *directly referential*, in the sense that the semantic rules for them “do not provide a complex which together with a circumstance of evaluation yields an object. They just provide an object” (Kaplan 1989b, p. 495). Though not all rigid designators, even *de jure* ones, will be directly referential, he thinks all directly referential expressions will be rigid (Kaplan 1989a, p. 571). If this is right and if I’m right that indexicals are not rigid, it will follow that they are not directly referential, either.

⁸See, among others, Geurts (1997), Elbourne (2005), Maier (2009), Hunter (2013), and Fara (2015).

We need to introduce one more part of the standard view contributed by Kaplan: that metaphysical modals are not *monsters*—they are not operators which shift contextual parameters.⁹ This means that in a given context, an indexical will have the same intension regardless of whether it is inside or outside the scope of metaphysical modal operators.

Now let's look at how the standard Kripke-Kaplan story goes for a normal metaphysical modal attribution using a first-personal pronouns, such as in a counterfactual.¹⁰ Suppose someone—call him Donald—utters the following.

- (7) If I were a police officer, I would arrest someone.

Because Donald is the speaker, an unembedded occurrence of *I* will refer to him. And because *I* is rigid, any occurrence of *I* will refer to Donald in every circumstance of evaluation. And because there are no monsters here, the *I* in the consequent will also have to refer to Donald, again rigidly. So (7) will be true iff in the closest worlds where Donald is a police officer, Donald arrests someone in those worlds. This seems right, as far as it goes. ‘Score: 1’ for the orthodoxy.

But what happens when we try to run the Kripke-Kaplan account on a counteridentical which involves double lives? We get a contradiction. Start with the following contrast.

- (8) a. If I were you, I would arrest myself.
 b. If I were you, I would arrest me.

We note that in (8-b), as is clear when contrasted between (8-a), the consequent describes situations in which one person arrests another—no self-arresting need be involved. It's not the case that the *I* and *me* of the consequent must corefer; indeed, it seems that they must not corefer. But assuming unembedded occurrences of *I* and *me* both refer to the speaker in the context, and that there are no monsters, and that *I* and *me* are rigid designators, then the occurrences of *I* and *me* in the consequent of (8-b) must both refer to the speaker of the context in any circumstance of evaluation. Given the necessity of identity, the *I* and *me* of the consequent must corefer. But this is a contradiction—we've said that it's not the case that the corefer.

In the course of deriving our contradiction, we relied on a few substantive planks of the classical Kripke-Kaplan platform. They are: (i) Rigidity of *I* and *me*, (ii) No Monsters, and (iii) Necessity of Identity. To account for double lives in counteridenticals, I believe we should drop (i). But it's worth noting that getting rid of any one of these will undermine the claim that *de re* modal sameness is one of transworld identity in anything like the sense that Kripke and others believe. Giving up rigidity means, straightforwardly, that when considering counterfactual scenarios, the referent of *I* is not in general going to be identical to the referent in the actual world. If we say that what goes on in counterfactuals is some sort of monstrous context-

⁹Famously, Kaplan makes the much broader claim that there can be no monsters in natural languages. Following the work of Schlencker (2003) and others, this is now widely thought to be incorrect—it seems there are monstrous operators in at least some natural languages. Santorio (2010) argues that epistemic modals, even in English, are monsters. But nobody, as far as I know, claims metaphysical modals are monsters, which is the relevant position here.

¹⁰Nothing in the argument will turn on the details of any specific analysis of counterfactuals. For concreteness, I'll use the familiar Stalnaker-Lewis picture that a counterfactual is true when the closest worlds where the antecedent is true are worlds where the consequent is true.

I will be assuming, though, that counterfactuals and metaphysical modality are tightly linked, and that what goes for the treatment of *de re* attributions in one also goes for the others. I will be appealing to data from counterfactuals and drawing conclusions about metaphysical modality in general. I do not take the required connections to be particularly controversial, but they can be motivated in different ways. Most directly, if we follow the restrictor analysis of Kratzer (1986), counterfactuals in fact involve an metaphysical necessity modal. See Williamson (2007) for motivation from a different perspective.

parameter-shifting, we might be able to technically hold onto rigidity, but we'll have to give up the view that a non-counterfactual use of the same indexical uttered in the same context will refer to a same individual. And to make the monster solution work, we'd need an account of how the contextual parameters get shifted; I suspect we'd have to end up relying on a kind of accessibility relation that will be much like a counterpart relation. And finally, I know of no way of dropping (iii) while maintaining anything like the thesis of transworld identity for *de re* modal predication. The standard way of making sense of 'contingent identity' after Kripke's work has been to appeal to counterpart theory and give up rigidity of the relevant terms.¹¹

So I suggest we drop rigidity and treat *de re* modal predication using something more flexible. Counterpart theory is the obvious option. Happily, it has no trouble in allowing for counterfactual double lives. We just need to allow for multiple counterpart relations to be used in the same sentence, indexed to different occurrences of the referring terms. This is the path Lewis (1973, p. 43) takes for other reasons, and it turns up in his suggestion for dealing with counteridenticals:

For a familiar illustration of the need for counterpart relations stressing different respects of comparison, take '*If I were you ...*'. The antecedent worlds are worlds where you and I are vicariously identical; that is, we share a common counterpart. But we want him to be in *your* predicament with *my* ideas, not the other way around. He should be your counterpart under a counterpart relation that stresses similarity of predicament; mine under a different counterpart relation that stresses similarity of ideas.

This is also compatible with double lives: the *I* and the *me* of the consequent just need to be indexed to different counterpart relations, one relating the speaker to the shared counterpart, another relating her to another individual, e.g., one with a similar causal history to the speaker's.

This is by no means a complete theory, and it would take a lot of work to get it sufficiently into shape.¹² Its flexibility makes it prone to problems of overgeneration. But the task of accounting for counterfactual double lives within a counterpart theoretic framework seems feasible, whereas the Kripke-Kaplanian account seems to rule it out in principle. This seems to me a strong argument in favor of dropping rigid designation and moving to a counterpart theoretic treatment of *de re* modality.¹³

3 Objections and Replies

Orthodoxy tends not to cede easily. Let's consider a couple objections its defenders might make.

3.1 The Impossibility Objection

The impossibility objection goes as follows. The argument from double lives relies on treating counteridenticals as normal counterfactuals with antecedents that are possibly true. But counteridenticals are not normal counterfactuals. They are counterpossibles: counterfactuals

¹¹See Gibbard (1975), Lewis (1971), and Schwarz (2013).

¹²In other work, I propose a way of generalizing this theory, then refine it to avoid certain problems. Kocurek (*forthcoming*) also develops Lewis's proposal.

¹³We should be careful to not overstate the argument's scope. It doesn't undermine the very idea of transworld identity, it just undermines its use in dealing with *de re* modal ascriptions. Indeed, the counterpart-theoretic account of double lives in counterfactuals which I favor is compatible with using a possible worlds semantics with a constant domain. And it's even compatible with there being some expressions, or some uses of some expressions, which rigidly refer to these individuals.

with impossible antecedents. By the necessity of identity (and rigidity of *I* and *you*), I couldn't have been you; to assume otherwise is just to beg the question against the transworld identity theorist. And weird things happen with counterpossibles...

At this point, the objection diverges into two versions. On one major view, counterpossibles are all vacuously true. There are no possible worlds in which the antecedent holds, so it follows that in all of the worlds in which it does hold (all 0 of them), the consequent holds as well. If we accept this, then there's no problem in explaining the possibility of true utterances of any of the sentences in (8) and (6).

What can't be so easily explained is why some counteridenticals seem to be false, like certain utterances of the above sentences, or ones like.

(9) If I were Shaq I'd be 200 ft tall.

Here we must say that utterances of these are all true, and merely seem false. We'll have to rely on some non-semantic explanation of why they seem false.¹⁴ As difficult as this task may be, there's no strong reason yet to think there's a threat to rigidity here.

The second version of the objection could be made by someone who takes counterpossibles to be sometimes substantively true and other times substantively false. There are various ways to go about doing this, each revising the standard view of possible world semantics for counterfactuals in some way. One common strategy is to introduce impossible worlds. If we do this, we might admit that it's true that the referents in the consequent of a double-life counteridentical are distinct, but nevertheless claim we need not drop transworld identity. We say this is just another impossibility that arises in the counterpossible scenario—that something is distinct from itself. We'll need to develop an account of identity and reference in counterpossible scenarios, but it's not clear that there will be any problem with rigidity in doing so, and even if some problem arises, we need not think it should reflect back on rigidity in ordinary counterfactuals dealing only with possible worlds.

The impossibility objection is troubling to the argument from counteridentical double lives. There are various rejoinders to it we might pursue. We might defend the view that the antecedents really are possible, and say that the Kripke-Kaplan view rules this out is just a further problem with the view. Or we might criticize the most plausible versions of the pragmatic or revisionary accounts that could be used to save rigidity, or defend an alternative as doing a better of accounting for various data.¹⁵ Instead of taking of any of these direct routes, though, we can follow an easier path: we can simply make the argument using cases of counterfactual double lives with clearly possible antecedents.

3.2 Double Lives Outside of Counteridenticals

So far we've only seen the phenomenon of counterfactual double lives in the rather strange (but nevertheless common and productive) construction that is the counteridentical. Though this is where the phenomenon is most prevalent, it also appears elsewhere. Consider the following.

(10) If I were a police officer, I would arrest me.

This seems acceptable (and true in some contexts), but is no counteridentical—the antecedent is just an ordinary one, as in

(11) If I were a police officer, I would have a badge.

¹⁴See Williamson (2015).

¹⁵This last is the path taken by Kocurek (forthcoming).

But if this is right, then counterfactual double lives appear in counterfactuals with clearly possible antecedents. We can then restate the argument of §2 using these other counterfactuals and thereby totally avoid the impossibility objection.

Besides appearing in counterfactuals, they also can arise in (metaphysical) modal subordination,¹⁶ and the subordinating supposition, again, can be clearly possible.

(12) I could have been a police officer. I would have arrested me for what I just did.

They can also be less blatant than in these cases of distinct referents for *I* and *me*. For example, a wily criminal, discussing the investigation into a crime she herself committed, might say

(13) If I were a detective, I would have solved this crime ages ago.

The criminal makes a double appearance here both explicitly as the detective solving the crime and implicitly as the criminal who the detective discovers did it. To make the double life more apparent, note that she might follow with

(14) I would have realized that only I was capable of getting through the bank's security.

And of course there is no suggestion that it would have been a detective who committed the crime and discovers herself to have done it, as in some psychological thriller.

Counterfactual double lives, then, are more widespread than they first appear, and are not limited to cases with antecedents of questionable possibility. And this means the impossibility objection won't work.

The objector might respond that while the antecedent of (10) *appears* possible, as the antecedent of (11) is, it actually isn't, but is instead a counteridentical in disguise. On this view, we would have to read *a police officer* in a *de re* way, and it would have the same content as our old (8-b) if uttered by the speaker to some particular police officer. If this is right, then the antecedent really is still like the ones before, so the argument would still be subject to the impossibility objection.

I agree that there is such a reading of (10), but I deny that this is the only one. We can perfectly well say the following, forcing a *de dicto* reading of *a police officer*.

(15) If I were a police officer—not any particular actual police officer (for all I know there aren't any police officers left), just if I were some police officer—I would arrest me.

It is not plausible that this has a *de re*, disguised counteridentical reading. Thus the impossibility objection is indeed dodged.

There are some last ditch efforts we can try on behalf of the impossibility objector, though. We could say that even though the antecedent is possible, something impossible is happening in the situation the consequent describes anyways. We could then say these are trivially false (and rely heavily on pragmatics), or take the revisionary approach of appealing to impossible worlds, as before. This suggestion, though, is unappealing for various reasons. Among them the fact that it requires giving up the following principle: if $p > q$ and $\Diamond p$, then $\Diamond q$. Given that, at least on the *de dicto* reading of *a police officer*, the antecedent of (10) is clearly possible in some contexts where an utterance of the sentence would seem true, we should conclude that what the consequent describes is also possible.

Another response would be to say there's some implicit material in the antecedents of counterfactuals with double lives which, when spelled out, reveal them to be impossible. But

¹⁶On modal subordination, see Roberts (1989).

without some story of what that material is and why we should think it is there, this suggestion is *ad hoc*, and I see little reason to accept it if there are alternatives.

3.3 Descriptive Indexicals?

Another objection, though, does apply to cases of counterfactual lives outside of counteridenticals. The objection is that we've relied on too simple a view of how *I* and *me* and other referring expressions work, and that once we have a truer, more complicated picture, we can hang on to the Kripke-Kaplan orthodoxy, or at least most of it.

According to this objection, indexicals can be used in the normal, *de re* way, but they also have a descriptive use, on which they behave like a contextually supplied definite description which in fact holds of the normal referent, but will refer to whichever individual satisfies the description in other possible worlds. That is, it admits that there are non-rigid uses of indexicals. This, of course, is a real restriction of the standard view, which is usually taken to be fully general.¹⁷ But we might think it's a restriction we should have already made in response to 'descriptive indexicals', which are already fairly well known.¹⁸ These are uses of indexicals like the following.

Here the *I* means something like *the condemned prisoner* and *he* means something like *the pope*. And descriptive indexicals seem to work in counterfactuals.

- (17) If we had abolished the electoral college, he [pointing at Trump] would be a woman.

The proposal, then, is that at least one of indexicals in a double-life counterfactual is a descriptive indexical, so doesn't have any bearing on the restricted standard theory, which maintains rigidity only for 'plain', non-descriptive uses of indexicals. Thus the objector can maintain that there's no *new* problem for the standard view from counterfactual double lives. And much of the Kripke-Kaplan picture can remain intact, depending on how we react to descriptive indexicals.

This objection fails, though. Counterfactual double lives cannot be successfully treated in terms of descriptive indexicals. Take one of our double life cases, (10), repeated as (18).

- (18) If I were a police officer, I would arrest me.

The claim we're considering is that at least one of the pronouns in the consequent is a descriptive indexical. But I don't think we can take either of them to be descriptive indexicals.

It can't be the *I*, because there isn't any contextually salient description that holds of the speaker in the actual context and is used to pick out the referent in other circumstances of evaluation. The obvious candidate is *the police officer*, but this can't work, since it's presumed that the speaker is not in fact a police officer. But what *I* would have to mean if it were being used descriptively is some description which does hold of the actual speaker.

And it can't be *me*, because when we use tricks which force a non-descriptive reading, we still understand the *me* in the same way. Consider what happens when we add nominal appositives with names to the sentences that had descriptive readings of indexicals available.

¹⁷Though we might follow the strategy of Kripke (1977) and try to treat these as non-literal uses for which semantic reference and speaker reference diverge and thereby maintain the rigid semantics for all occurrences of indexicals, making this version of the objection non-revisionary to the standard view.

¹⁸ For a discussion of recent attempts account for descriptive indexicals, see Sæbø (2015).

- (19) a. He, Pope Francis, is usually an Italian.
 b. If we had abolished the electoral college, he, Donald Trump, would have been a woman.

The descriptive readings vanish. Where we once had true and non-maxim-violating readings of the sentences which relied on descriptive uses of the indexicals, now there are no such readings to be found. But what happens when we try the same with (18)?

- (20) If I were a police officer, I would arrest me, Mike Deigan.

Nothing much happens. It's a bit more explicit, and there will likely be some pragmatic effects of mentioning the name, but there's no blocking of a double-life reading. And if there were, we'd expect the reflexive pronoun to be used instead, so we'd expect this new sentence to sound ungrammatical, but it doesn't. So even when we force a non-descriptive reading of *me*, we still get the same effect, so it can't be a descriptive reading of *me* that is doing the work.

So it's neither a descriptive reading of the *I* or the *me* in (18) that's responsible for the second counterfactual life. I conclude that the effect of counterfactual double lives is not attributable to descriptive uses of indexicals.

We've now considered a couple objections to the argument from counterfactual double lives and found that neither holds much promise for rescuing the Kripke-Kaplan account. If there's no alternative that does better, we may wish to reexamine these or consider other objections to the argument. Luckily, though, it seems that the main alternative approach to *de re* modal predication—the counterpart theoretic approach—has the resources to handle counterfactual double lives.

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